

Black History Month 2014: The Native Sons and Daughters of Alabama

Honoring Theresa Burroughs During Black History Month 2014

February 26, 2014

Ms. SEWELL. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to continue my commitment to paying homage to influential African Americans from the state of Alabama during this Black History Month. Today, we pause to pay tribute to one of Alabama's most courageous and daring heroines of the civil rights movement, Mrs. Theresa Burroughs. In Alabama, this American treasure is celebrated for her role in providing a safe haven to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during his visit to Greensboro, Alabama in 1968.

Mrs. Burroughs was born on August 14, 1929 in Greensboro, Alabama. She attended Hale County Training School. At just ten years old, Burroughs was certain that her calling was in style and beauty. It was at that age that she built a clientele of women in her neighborhood who sought Burroughs for her impeccable skills as a hairstylist. She charged 25 cents for her services and built a lasting reputation with the women of Greensboro that would sustain her for the rest of her life. Her passion for beauty led her to the Besteda School of Cosmetology in Mobile and Tuscaloosa. After graduating, she returned to Greensboro to open up her very own hair salon.

But, while she found lifelong success and gratification in the business, Burroughs recalls that she grew restless over the hardships blacks endured at the hands of racism and inequality. At 18, she joined with the Rev. J.J. Simmons, a local minister that would take blacks to the Hale County courthouse to attempt to register to vote. Every first and third Monday of each month, Burroughs and others would be turned away. But after 10 attempts, the group was successful.

Burroughs credits Rev. Simmons with encouraging her to continue her role in the movement. As a result, she was on the frontlines during "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Alabama and was among the countless marchers who were beaten during the demonstration. Her salon was also used as a meeting place for Dr. King and others as they gathered for planning sessions. She became so influential in the movement that some of her clients were instructed not to patronize her salon because she was deemed an "agitator." Nonetheless, she remained committed to doing her part.

In March 1968, just two weeks before his death, Dr. King came to Greensboro to speak at a mass meeting. After the meeting, Dr. King was warned that members of the Klan planned to assassinate him if he attempted to leave Greensboro and travel to Selma. He sought refuge in the home of Mrs. Burroughs' parents as churches were burned along his travel route. He along with the Rev. Ralph Abernathy and their driver Bernard Lee remained undetected at the home until 4 a.m. Burroughs along with others kept watch as Klansmen swarmed the streets of Greensboro in search of Dr. King.

In a recent Birmingham News article, Burroughs recalled what it meant to her to have a role in keeping Dr. King alive if only for a short time. "We helped keep Martin safe that night only to see him die two weeks later and you are tempted to think what good did we really do," said Burroughs. "But I know it mattered because Martin had another two weeks to do his work and two weeks in the life of a man like him was a lot."

Today, Burroughs continues to tell her compelling story through her work as director of the "Safe House Museum" in Greensboro, Alabama. The museum is housed in the same home where Dr. King took refuge in 1968. Mrs. Burroughs donated her parent's property to the city to preserve the historic site for future generations. At the museum, visitors are given a glimpse into what it was like for Dr. King and others on that night in 1968.

It is indeed an honor to share the story of this heroine with our nation. Her selfless contributions to the Civil Rights movement should never be forgotten. Mrs. Burroughs risked her life to protect the most important figure in the Civil Rights movement and for that, she should be celebrated. As a benefactor of the blood that she and so many others shed, I ask my colleagues to join me in honoring Mrs. Theresa Burroughs, an American hero.